

## Between Margin and Centre:

### Researching 'Non-standard' Japanese

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#### Abstract

Marginality depends on the relationship with something that is constructed as central or mainstream. In cross-cultural fieldwork, the position of the researcher in relation to his informants may be marginal. Informants may be perceived as marginal in their society. Within academia, particular topics of research may be marginalized and funding organizations may not fund such topics. In the case of my research topics of sexuality, gender and sexual activity in Japan, Japanese government funding organizations appear to be relatively receptive, providing these themes are parsed in a valid academic manner. The bigger problem was establishing academic contacts, as there are few Japanese researchers working on sexuality. As a researcher, my position was not particularly different from other people in the networks and groups concerned. The question of marginality of the informants in relation to Japanese society depends greatly on one's vantage point. Generally, informants did not think in terms like marginality and in many ways they were full members of their society. Sexuality, however, is trivialized as a topic, as a result of which coming out as gay or lesbian or discussing one's activities as a sex worker, may lead to some extent of marginalization. However, this is the case with all sexuality that transgresses clearly defined boundaries. Within

the academic establishment may lie the biggest problem in relation to marginality. Sexuality is often not regarded as a proper topic for investigation, which may lead to an over-theorization of issues on which few data are available. Many academics have had little sex education and their home cultures often place strong moral judgements on matters pertaining to sex, thus preventing a proper academic discussion.

## Introduction

My research concerns mostly categories of people who, in Western academic discourses, are often cast as marginal. They include gay and lesbian people, singles, feminists, transsexuals and, more recently, sex workers. In Japan, however, the very idea of marginality is one that only recently entered academic discourse and as such remains largely undeveloped (Valentine 1990). This is reflected in the fact that my major research categories have been little investigated by Japanese scholars.

Texts on gay and lesbian people and on sex workers abound in Japan. However, they are rarely produced by people working within the academic establishment. The journalistic environment appears to offer more possibilities. Thus, my research topics appear to be marginal in Japanese academic discourses and not only there. I found that researchers working on these topics in Western contexts also often feel that the topics are marginalized. This can be seen in, for instance, a seeming inequality in opportunities to acquire funding for research into questions of sexuality. To what extent is this a reality and how does it relate to the Japanese situation?

Since few people had previously conducted research my chosen topics in Japan, even fewer published about it and those who did hardly dealt with questions of research methodology, I found myself in the situation of having little relevant guidance. How to get into the field, how to recruit informants, how to deal with ethical questions, and how to position myself in relation to my informants were matters I had to discover during the process of conducting the fieldwork.

It was not difficult to find informants willing to talk with me about my research topics. Indeed, often they went further in discussing matters more personal than I deemed necessary for my research. In these discussions, marginality turned out to be much not much of an issue. My informants by and large saw themselves as standing at the centre of society, not on its periphery. Thus, in accordance with their absence in the emic discourses prevalent among my informants, I have not used concepts like marginality in my ethnographic writing.

A question that came to mind is to what extent Japanese academia can be seen as marginal to Japanese society and – for that matter – how academia in Western countries relates to their own societies and to those they study. Eventually, the research developed to the point of presenting results. I generally present papers in two arenas: (a) that of Anglo-American-dominated Japanese Studies and (b) that of the social study (especially anthropology) of sexuality, which is also largely Anglo-American dominated. In the latter context, Anglo-American discourse meets with a strong challenge from continental European scholars and scholars from throughout the world, not least from those in Asia.

My experiences at these conferences are the third topic I investigate in this article: What differences are there in talking of matters relating to sexuality in various academic contexts and how do these relate to the overall question of marginality? I shall question the pros and cons of separate Japanese Studies conferences for specialized subjects like sexuality in view of the fact that (a) this is an area in which most Japan specialists are novices and (b) other non-Japanese participants at these conferences may be specialized in sexuality but novices to Japan.

This article concludes with a discussion of the various layers of marginality and centrality which I feel played a role in my research, in four different relations:

1. between the researcher and funding organizations, including academic establishments,
2. between the researcher and his or her informants,
3. between informants and their society, and

4. between the researcher and the international academic establishment.

### **Positioning: Marginal Centres, Central Margins?**

Durkheim categorized people who nowadays might be deemed to be marginal as 'criminals' and spoke of them in terms like 'pathological' and 'morbid'. Nevertheless, he also thought that 'criminals' had their place in society and could be of importance to further social development in new directions (Durkheim 1964). In the 1970s the most commonly used term for the same categories, comprising groups such as homosexuals, prostitutes and criminals, was 'deviants'. The approach now has changed to portray them as victims rather than as people in charge of their own lives. As victims, they are seen as in need of help by the often well-meaning scholars investigating them. The distance between 'criminal', 'deviant' and 'marginal' seems small. All of them are excluded from the supposed centre or mainstream.

Unlike Durkheim's criminals, however, deviants were not generally seen as potential contributors to valuable social developments. Marginals equally are not generally seen as such. It appears that scholarship has departed from the potentially shifting relations that seem to be present in Durkheim to a more essentialized, naturalized and immovable position in which the centre is somewhere that everyone wants to be and the marginal are deemed in need of support.

Obviously, most work dealing with marginality uses the dichotomy between centre and margin in an essentialist manner as overlapping with a supposed mainstream and minority respectively (Gannon 1999). For a number of reasons I do not feel at ease with this approach. The most important one is that I do not really perceive any centre that overlaps with a mainstream, either in Japan or anywhere else. Perhaps in Japan this is even more in evidence than elsewhere. Japanese society has become very open towards all sorts of influences, and people

nowadays may develop their personal interests in a variety of combinations that is rarely seen in any other place or time.

While much work on Japanese society, like on other societies, has focused on what is most common and how people should live according to some common-sense idea, my experience suggests that many people adhere to this only in a superficial manner or because they feel compelled to do so. Their personal pursuits and ideas, which often are much more important to them as individuals than their roles in public life, are scarcely represented in academic writing.

In Japanese studies, work on men has typically concentrated on *sarariiman* (white-collar workers) and so much so, that men working outside this environment have become next to invisible (Miller 1993). Constructs that are usually presented as mainstream, such as the lifestyle characterized by a nuclear family with a *sarariiman* working outside the house and a housewife to take care of the household, in fact constitute only a minority.<sup>1</sup> For many people living in different situations, this supposed centre may be marginal to their worldviews.

Even the *sarariiman* themselves may be gay, they may engage in sex work as a freelance side occupation or they may make use of the services offered by sex workers. They may obviously engage in their homosexuality or sex-work activities in contexts that are sharply divided from their daytime occupation and as such these activities may be perceived as marginalized. At their companies, however, the *sarariiman* are what their function is worth, regardless of what they do after hours, as long as it does not interfere with their function.

To the individual concerned, however, the gay activities or the sex-work activities may be perceived as of more importance. I know more than one case of a *sarariiman* who quit his job in order to devote himself to gay activities of one sort or another. How, then, can I persist in the view that homosexuality is marginal? The idea of marginality is accompanied by the idea that the marginalized are victims of society. Are such men, then, choosing to be victims? If so, what is the attraction of the supposed margin as opposed to the supposed centre?

## Getting into the Field

In the book *Out in the Field: Reflections of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists* (Lewin and Leap 1996), a number of authors complain about the difficulty of finding funding for their research. Usually they attribute this to the funding organizations' sexophobia or homophobia, which causes a lack of interest in and knowledge about topics concerning sexuality, particularly where homosexuality is concerned (Lewin 1996; Bolton 1996). Some researchers have been told flatly that if they mention homosexuality explicitly in their research proposal, they will not get funding (Wafer 1996).

In line with this, most of my academic advisers thought that it might be difficult for me to find funding for my Ph.D. project, since it was concerned with gay men and lesbian women, besides single and feminist people. I was advised that it might be better not to be explicit about homosexuality in particular but instead to write in more 'neutral' terms, such as 'unmarried people'. However, this term is problematic given the fact that in Japan, as elsewhere, many gay and lesbian people live in heterosexual marriages and the use of such a 'neutral' category leads inevitably to a tremendous bias in the presentation of the research.

Another problem advisers envisaged was that it would be very difficult to find informants willing to talk about topics such as their sexuality. It was perceived as likely to be next to impossible to find closeted gay and lesbian people living inside heterosexual marriages who would be prepared to talk about topics such as the discrepancy between how they were seen by those in their environment and how they actually felt. The general expectation was that these topics were extremely sensitive and that not many people would be willing to cooperate in my research project.

In Western contexts, homosexuality is often dealt with in terms of perversion, deviance and marginality and is often regarded as an unsuitable topic for discussion. Marginalization

of topics relating to homosexuality in academic environments certainly exists. This leads to homosexuality being dealt with almost exclusively as an isolated subject, without much attention given to how it relates to sexuality in general or to other realms of society. Given the fact that, when I began my project, little had been published about homosexuality in contemporary Japan, it was not surprising that many advisers, with Western cultural backgrounds, considered it an extremely sensitive subject.

My experiences with acquiring funding have been mixed. Initially I followed the idea that it might be wiser to use neutral wording and I avoided terms such as 'homosexuality', 'gay' and 'lesbian'. However, when writing research proposals in this manner, it proved very difficult to remain plausible about what the project was concerned with. To me it was obvious that a description like 'people whose ideas, feelings and/or lifestyles disagree with the Japanese marriage system' principally refers to gay, lesbian, single and feminist people. However, it became soon clear that other scholars often had difficulty imagining what people I was talking about.

It became too abstract for many of those who often find themselves in the position of having ideas, feelings and a lifestyle that place them within the realm of perceived mainstream ideas. This is not a reflection only on conservative older scholars. Years later I introduced my topic in this manner to a group of young European students at the University of Oxford and they thought that I was aiming at women who felt suppressed in marriage. Not until I explicitly mentioned the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' did they begin to comprehend what I was talking about.

As I also had an aversion to this game of hide-and-seek, I eventually decided to mention explicitly the categories I had in mind. This helped to make my research proposal much clearer, although it may also have led to prospective supervisors in Japan withdrawing their support. It was a major problem to find a Japanese professor who was willing officially to supervise me. This can partly be attributed to the fact that at my home institution at the time few contacts existed with Japanese

scholars working in fields like gender and sexuality. Apart from that, these fields appeared to be marginal within the Japanese academic corpus.

Those professors who had acquired positions in which they could reasonably be seen as appropriate supervisors tended to be extremely busy not only with their normal work, but also with many activities related to improving the standing of their field. Furthermore, at this particular juncture, many foreign students wished to conduct research on these topics, in particular gender, as it was an upcoming topic in Western academia. Eventually, however, I found a good official supervisor in Ueno Chizuko.

The second step was securing the funding and here the reaction of a selection committee was very telling about how gay, lesbian, single and feminist people may be seen with regard to Japanese society. I was told that there were 'so few' of them. This may have been because the committee felt they needed to explain why the scholarship had not awarded to me. Simultaneously, though, it implied the slighting of a topic based on a futile argument. Most anthropological research deals with small numbers of people and I have never heard people doing research on literature being criticized for only dealing with a few writers. The question of how many people a research project is concerned with is irrelevant to its value.

However, the next year, I presented an estimate of 15 to 20 million people with whom my research was concerned, based on a very conservative estimate. Merely the number of Japanese who remain single above the age of 25 in 1990 is more than half of this figure. Add to these the many gay, lesbian and feminist people who did marry and the people who divorced or were widowed and the figure rises significantly.<sup>2</sup> By providing this estimate, I made it clear that my research was not dealing with a small and marginal category. This time I was awarded the scholarship. Although a member of the committee said that he had never realized the year before how many people the research was concerned with, I do not believe that giving these figures in the end was decisive. It rather seems that having established better academic contacts and showing tenacity



allowed me to win the scholarship. In the end, I do not believe that the fact that homosexuality was a central topic to the project made much difference.

The marginality of particular topics may play a role in opportunities to acquire research funding but this may be less the case for Japanese funding organizations than for American or British ones, where at times it is explicitly stated that research on gay and lesbian issues is not funded.<sup>3</sup> The general Japanese institutional discrimination against non-established topics seems to have a marginalizing effect on research on 'non-standard' Japanese but it does not always prevent it. As in Europe and the US, jobs are hard to come by for scholars specializing in these areas, not only owing to sexophobia or homophobia but also because the topics are seen as being of minority interest to the field at large.<sup>4</sup> This may lead to this type of research being conducted by people who are really involved in their topic for the sake of it rather than in order to acquire a degree and a position in academia.

Research on gay and lesbian issues is at present being carried out mostly by graduate students at a variety of Japanese institutions, including some of the most prestigious ones, such as Tsukuba University, the University of Tokyo and Osaka University. It appears that the less research-oriented and more education-oriented institutions have less room for it. However, among this type of establishment too there are some that afford the opportunity for research on sexuality beyond the context of procreation within a heterosexual relationship.

## **The Research: Researcher and Informants**

As with most innovative anthropological research, initially I had to find a way of gaining entry into an area largely unknown to me. I did have some contacts with lesbian, gay and feminist organizations before entering the field but they were located in Tokyo, whereas I now found myself in the Kansai area. However, I was aware that such organizations also existed in the Kansai area. My first step was to contact local gay

organizations in the area by responding to advertisements in gay magazines. Simultaneously, Fujieda Mioko, who unofficially replaced Ueno Chizuko as my supervisor during her absence, introduced me to some lesbian and single acquaintances and to the Men's Liberation Network (Menzu Ribū Kenkyū-kai), which is based in Osaka and Kyoto.

Having received many warnings about the sensitive nature of my research, I was initially surprised by the welcoming attitude of the groups I contacted. Only in one case, a lesbian contact network, was the reaction somewhat problematic. This network aimed at bringing lesbian women into contact with prospective partners for romantic purposes and the co-ordinator felt, rightly I believe, that she could not trouble all involved with my initial request. She invited me, nevertheless, to write a letter outlining the purposes of my research and providing clear questions. I did not use this possibility, as in the meantime I had found easier and more direct access to other organizations and I felt no use for a survey at this stage of my research. I needed to investigate which issues mattered to my informants and this was achieved by participant observation and in-depth interviewing.

All other groups and networks showed a positive attitude to my requests and had no objections against letting a foreigner participate in their meetings and conduct participant observation with them. They did not go out of their way to make allowances for any difficulties I had in participating, such as having to listen for hours on end to Japanese often spoken in local dialects. For my purpose of participant observation, this attitude – which was characterized by them continuing their business as usual – was, of course, most desirable. During the entire process no problematic situations evolved whatsoever, except for the case of one group, Occur, also known as Ugoku Gei to Rezubian no Kai (Group of Moving Gays and Lesbians).<sup>5</sup>

Initially, Occur invited me to a *gasshuku* (overnight group stay) in Osaka, which was part of their tour of Japan aimed at informing the public about a court case they had initiated against the metropolitan government of Tokyo. Thereafter, their co-operation diminished to the extent that in the end they did

not answer any of my questions. Other researchers experienced the same lack of co-operation, which appears to have been characteristic of this group. People were expected to be either inside or outside the group and being inside meant complying with the opinions of the leaders and refraining from voicing dissent (Lunsing 1998, 1999a, in press a). As I was conducting research with many other groups, I had made myself more or less a *persona non grata* in theirs. They allowed me to attend a session of their court case and I could meet members on an individual basis or at various events but I was not welcome at their meetings or at their office. Members I interviewed were told that they must not talk about internal affairs or policies of Occur but only about personal matters.

This did not, however, result in my information about Occur being more limited than that of other groups. In fact, I developed good insights into the internal affairs of Occur by listening to people who had been dismissed from the group for having dissident views or for engaging in activities that were not condoned by the leadership. It appears that their accounts of Occur were more reliable than any I would have been likely to get from people inside the organization.<sup>6</sup> Publications offering these insights (Lunsing 1997, 1998, 1999a, in press a) have been well received by my informants and others in Japan. My main criticism of Occur is that, while claiming to represent Japanese gay and lesbian people, it does little to relate to other lesbian or gay organizations or to lesbian and gay people at large in Japan. – This is a view widely shared by other lesbian and gay activists and others throughout Japan.

Apart from participant observation in these groups and in a variety of networks, I conducted in-depth interviews with a broad mix of informants, recruited in different ways: some through the groups and networks I dealt with and others through the snowball method, as well as through contact advertisements and meetings in public places. In most cases, informants were eager to talk with me and felt that my research was of great relevance to them. Very few refused to be interviewed, and this was usually because they were either in high positions in academia and not openly lesbian (this only

happened in the case of lesbian women) or because they thought that they were not interesting or intelligent enough, in which case it was usually possible to persuade them to the contrary.

On the other hand, in networks and groups where I interviewed some participants, many others offered to be interviewed also. Indeed, in some cases this almost led to rivalry. It seemed that to be chosen as an interviewee brought status with it, signifying that one must be interesting and important to have so much personal attention devoted to oneself. As for the sensitivity of the topics, my interviewees often went beyond the matters I wanted to discuss to include much more intimate details, such as their sexual activities. During the fieldwork many informants became close friends and lasting relationships were built.

Following this project, a later research project was concerned with sexual activity. It followed from the fact that my informants and interviewees volunteered information on their sexual activity even without my asking about it. As part of the participant observation for this project, I was invited to meetings of sex workers who were building a prostitutes' network. This group did not usually invite scholars or journalists to their meetings. They felt that the interference of scholars writing about them was not likely to be in their best interests, given the fact that Japanese and many other scholars tend to see matters like prostitution in terms of morality or social pathology. Journalists were not invited because they anticipated the opposition of the *yakuza* (Japanese mafia) if their activities were too openly exposed in the Japanese mass media.

The fact that I was invited stemmed from my personal relation with some members of the group. They felt that my way of dealing with sexuality was in agreement with their own objectives of getting it out of the sphere of dogmatic morality of good and evil and into that of everyday life. One of them had been an interviewee in my earlier project and appeared to have seen this interview as an important contribution to his own development. The other became a close friend as a participant in a network in which I had been conducting participant

observation over a period of nearly five years. When at one meeting someone said that they did not want scholars to be present, I pointed out that I was present in a scholarly capacity. The view was then expressed that I was the type of scholar they wanted to be there, the exception that confirms the rule.

This was also related to the fact that they knew that in my work I do not obliterate my own sexual experience, that I am not posing as some sex-neutral scholar not made of flesh and blood. In 1999 I had an interesting conversation with a man in a gay bar in Osaka until he discovered that I was a researcher working on sexuality. He criticized the 'many' researchers that asked questions in gay bars and were good to talk to, but who did not allow themselves to get involved with the people they met in this way. He thought that such an attitude was very unpleasant, as the researchers in question did not treat him as a person of flesh and blood but only as a research object. Fortunately, I could truly say that my attitude was open towards sexual involvement, should I meet someone I like.<sup>7</sup> While this attitude established my position as an acceptable participant in various research contexts, the fact that I do not cover this up in my writing, may have functioned to marginalize myself within the academic sphere.

In both projects, I was readily accepted as a participant. The research developed unproblematically, notwithstanding the advice that the sensitive nature of my topics would make it extremely difficult. The only difficulty had been finding people in the initial stage, not the topics I wanted discussed. A colleague suggested that those who gave this advice would have great difficulty addressing these topics themselves, rather than that Japanese gay, lesbian, single, feminist people and sex workers generally have such a problem. In this context, it appears to me that academia may marginalize itself due to the fact that it generally feels unable to deal with topics that are seen as sensitive in their own cultural context, the academic one. This idea was strengthened in discussions with several colleagues in the field, some of whom said that they would feel uncomfortable asking people the questions I asked. It was also

underlined when I gave presentations based on my research, about which more below.

In the research context, marginality hardly played a role. Being a foreigner, I could easily have been marginalized as a participant in the various groups, but this did not happen. No special attention was given to me, I was just one of the people present. If there was a round of everybody voicing his/her opinion, I was equally expected to voice mine and mine was not weighed differently from anyone else's. In some cases I was asked to participate in meetings *because* I was a foreigner and the organizers thought that it might be interesting to hear a foreigner's opinion or because they thought that having a foreigner on their side might add to the weight of their opinions. This, indeed, seemed to be the case when I accompanied a group of gay men to criticize the Osaka prefectural and municipal health board for their misdirected AIDS prevention policies. While this is a form of commodification of foreigners common in Japan, I had little difficulty in establishing my boundaries and not consenting when I felt something was not in the interest of my research.

## **The Researched and their Society**

A conclusion of the research project that led to my Ph.D. degree was that Japan offers ample possibilities for people to engage in lifestyles other than those that are generally constructed as standard. For those who are attracted to people of their own sex, society places little in their way if they wish to act in agreement with this attraction. Many people, however, do not wish to do so. Many people feel somehow that it is wrong to act upon their feelings, which is also reflected in the remorse people may feel after having engaged in (gay or lesbian) sexual activity. One could interpret them as marginalizing their own sexual attraction and activity.

People engaging in sex work can do so relatively undisturbed. Even though it is illegal, in practice society places little in their way. However, sex workers also tend to prevent

their occupational activities from becoming generally known. They also can be interpreted as marginalizing their sexual activity. Why should people marginalize themselves?

In the case of gay and lesbian people, the Japanese education system implicitly instils values that are contrary to a homosexual lifestyle. At home as well as at school, children are taught not to be too different on the penalty of being ostracized. Harmony, co-operation and belonging to a group are instilled as being of paramount importance (Hendry 1986; White 1987; Lunsing 1998, 1999a, in press a). Obviously, people may understand this as implying that homosexuality is better not shown. However, as Tobin (1992) outlined, at school children also learn that there are different contexts appropriate for different types of behaviour. Implicitly this may instil the idea that homosexuality may be enjoyed in particular contexts but should not interfere with one's role in others.

Thus, people are educated in a way that makes them believe that homosexuality should be contained within the appropriate contexts and in practice, by and large, it is. In the case of male homosexuality a large infrastructure has developed for men to meet, to drink and to have sex, comprising thousands of venues throughout Japan.<sup>8</sup> In the case of lesbian women however, this is much less in evidence, which can partly be attributed to a general lack of socializing opportunities for women, apart from those aimed at housewives. Lesbian women, however, also can find each other via feminist networks.

In the case of sex workers, the situation is different but it can be related. Their sexual activity was criminalized by the Anti-Prostitution Law of 1956 (Shiga-Fujime 1993; Lunsing 2000a). While this law does not criminalize sex workers themselves but rather their patrons and pimps, in practice it functions to worsen the working conditions of sex workers. The law is not put into practice apart from occasional raids – often aimed more at illegal aliens than sex workers per se – or when civilians complain about prostitution in their living environment.<sup>9</sup> Otherwise, prostitution is largely left untouched by the police.

Japanese women and men can relatively freely decide to become sex workers as well as to quit this occupation. Most important constraints playing here are obviously financial ones. Socially, however, being a sex worker is generally frowned upon. Sex work carries a social stigma. Sex workers are supposed to be unhappy about their occupation, notwithstanding evidence that shows that at least some sex workers enjoy their occupation. If prostitution were decriminalized and thereby sex workers be made less dependent on the 'protection' services of the *yakuza*, many of the problems confronting sex workers could be eradicated.

During my fieldwork period, a major event, 'the gay boom', swept through the Japanese media.<sup>10</sup> Initially started by some women's magazines writing on the popularity of gay men among Japanese heterosexual women, it developed to the extent that all the media felt it to be in their interest to devote attention to homosexuality. Initially, among gay and lesbian circles and their sympathizers, much criticism was voiced against what was seen as an inappropriate presentation that did nothing to support the reality of gay and lesbian people. However, eventually this boom led to many gay and lesbian authors writing in magazines, publishing books and appearing on television. Thus, it appeared that those who could be seen as marginal to mainstream life, ended up finding themselves the centre of attention.

Just as gay and lesbian people became increasingly the focus of the mass media, sex workers also gained much media attention during the 1990s and were also able to make themselves heard. A stylish geisha-type former mistress of Prime Minister Uno even managed to bring down his government, simply by accusing him of not having been a good patron, as he did not give her the expensive presents she felt she was entitled to as a high-class courtesan. He was not decent enough to keep a mistress in good order, so how could he be a good politician?<sup>11</sup> His downfall was precipitated by feminist women who criticized Uno further for having a mistress in addition to his wife in the first place, and by other events taking place in Japanese politics. But the start of the affair was the critique of



Uno's former mistress. The social stigma of sex workers does not necessarily rob them of influence in what most would see as mainstream politics.

The problem with both gay and lesbian people and with sex workers, is that their sexual activity more or less encroaches on the 'face' that they present to society at large. While most people engage in some form of sexual activity or other, this usually remains of no interest in relation to their social position. Lesbian and gay people can make it into a major issue by coming out, and if the occupation of sex workers becomes known, their whole being comes to be defined by their sexual activity. Notwithstanding a thriving and quite visible sex industry, sex generally is supposed to take place outside the public domain. If gay and lesbian people and sex workers place their sexuality on the agenda, they situate it into the middle of this domain. Their coming out and relating their sexual experiences challenges a social order in which sex is not supposed to be spoken of as a serious matter.

Does this mean that they are marginal to Japanese society? This seems hardly to be the case. It seems rather that gay and lesbian people and sex workers are integral parts of Japanese society's sexual make-up. While it may be obvious that discrimination against women in many occupations at least partly accounts for the fact that the number of women engaging in sex work is much larger than that of men, sex work itself can hardly be seen as a marginal aspect of Japanese society. It is in fact an integral part of the social organization of intimate relationships (Lunsing 2000a).<sup>12</sup>

Economically, marginalization on the grounds of sexual activity or preference does not seem to occur much. For instance, if one looks at the occupations and lifestyles of gay men, one discovers that they can be found in any occupation, ranging from prime minister to day labourer. They can equally be found living single, or living as husbands in nuclear families, or as fathers, husbands and sons in extended families. Among lesbian women not a few are housewives. Sex workers, equally, can be found with all sorts of social backgrounds and they also can be found in marriages.<sup>13</sup>

Marginalization on the basis of sex, however, is quite evident with women's wages being around 60 per cent of men's on average (Sakahigashi 1998: 55). Furthermore, in the case of men, unmarried men are marginalized when it comes to promotion in larger companies, though not in the civil service. In the networks and groups where I conducted my research, the supposedly powerful older career *sarariiman* were often sneeringly called *ossan*, a derogatory Kansai-*ben*<sup>14</sup> term for older or middle-aged men.<sup>15</sup> *Ossan* were categorized as people one would only want to deal with when strictly necessary. Feminists and prostitutes alike saw *ossan* as people one could never trust as equal discussion partners or anything else of importance, but as people to be taken advantage of as much as possible. Thus, from their viewpoint, *ossan* are quite 'marginal men', notwithstanding their being supposedly the most powerful.

Economically, it is clear that marginality is not a useful concept to approach people who are set apart from the supposed mainstream by their sexuality. Culturally, too, marginalization hardly seems to be a useful concept. In particular gay men can be found in considerable numbers in artistic occupations. Furthermore, as in my own country, the Netherlands, Japan has a number of gay men working as television show presenters (for instance the famous gay twins Osugi and Piiko) and as singers (a famous example is the transvestite gay man Miwa Akihiro).

The gay activist group Occur's presentation of gay people as oppressed by a hostile homophobic society dominated by straight people<sup>16</sup> was often deemed childish or incomprehensible even by other gay informants. It seems that the whole victimization theme, so popular in North American discourse, does not wash well in the Japanese worldview. As noted above, the concept of marginality often goes hand in hand with the concept of victimization. On the other hand, Japan does also have a discourse that celebrates sexuality in all its forms, which is promoted by gay and lesbian people and sex workers alike.

The concept of marginality had not entered the discourse of my informants and therefore it did not seem a very useful starting point for discussing people whose sexuality sets them

apart from what is perceived as mainstream, i.e. heterosexuality within marriage. Their sexuality may have little or no bearing on their social position. A term like 'marginalized sexualities', as used for instance by James Valentine (1997), has validity when used in etic discourse in the sense that it refers to some-'thing' being marginal rather than some-'one'. However, I cannot help but wonder what sexuality, then, is not marginal. The 'mainstream' *sarariiman* may very well be gay or engage in sex work or pay for sex, even while being a husband. Except, perhaps, when he is drunk, the *saariiman* is not supposed to talk about his sexual activity, regardless of whether it takes place with his wife or someone else, regardless of the context. There does not seem to be a 'mainstream' sexuality that can be spoken of without the speaker somehow becoming tainted. Thus, sexual marginality at most becomes a matter of gradation.

### Academic Talk about Sexuality

As Ken Plummer has discussed in his book *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995), in recent years we have witnessed an enormous change not only in the extent to which sexual matters are discussed, but also in the ways they are being dealt with. Plummer based his investigation largely on popular discourses. It seems that academic discourses are lagging behind. I recently attended a conference on 'Sexual Cultures in East Asia', organized by the International Institute of Asian Studies in Amsterdam, where all presenters had conducted participant observation to obtain the main body of data. Most of the participants were troubled because they thought that if they presented their work as they felt they should, in a direct and non-moralizing manner, it would not be acceptable to the establishment of Asian Studies. In their view, this establishment demanded that they present their data and ideas in a much more abstract manner than they would have liked, in other words they felt constrained to desexualize it.<sup>17</sup> We shared the experience that, in the contexts of Japanese and Asian Studies, our papers are often regarded as

controversial and that our research is trivialized as not being of major interest.

The controversy surrounding this type of research does not necessarily relate to the way the topic is treated. Often it is simply the very topic itself – and this can cover almost anything dealing with the practice of sex – that is seen as controversial. Partly, this may be due to the fact that the majority of academics have not been brought up in surroundings where sex, sexuality and sexual activity are regarded as ‘proper’ topics for discussion. Scholars are like any people brought up within a particular cultural setting and sex is usually under close moral scrutiny. Hence, it is no surprise that we are sometimes attacked for not taking a moral position condemning sex work and those who make use of the services of sex workers when discussing the everyday problematics in the life of sex workers. Such moralizing and insistence on taking a stand against something that is generally seen as ‘wrong’ often gets in the way of a proper academic discussion.

A while ago I attended a meeting in the Hague in the Netherlands, which had been called because prostitution was becoming a problem in parts of the town. I found that the ‘common’ people who made up the audience took a far more pragmatic approach to the topic than the approach normally adopted by scholars in the field of Asian and Japanese Studies. We were dealing with problematics they were familiar with and the discussion focused mostly on the question of how sex workers could be best supported in their activities while limiting the nuisance to the neighbourhood.

As mentioned above, in the context of Asian and Japanese Studies, it happens that we as presenters are attacked for not taking a ‘moral’ stance. It also happens that scholars turn out not to know basic matters like how lesbian women may have sex. Similarly, the prejudiced view that being a gay man entails necessarily having anal sex is omnipresent. On one occasion, when I was discussing constructions of gay and lesbian people and how their lifestyles relate to them, someone even suggested that I compose a ‘pathology’ of sex in Japan. This would place a value-judgement on sexual activity before even starting to

consider it, and as such is diametrically opposed to the interests of my informants. Apart from it being a very outdated approach, it would entail betraying my informants.

When looking at research carried out on the area of sexuality and sexual activity in Japan, one of the first things that one notices is that more often than not the research is historical. This is true not only in the case of work by historians but also in that of sociologists and anthropologists. Why should this be the case? I have colleagues who wanted to work on contemporary matters but they felt insecure about asking about 'such personal matters' and eventually ended up delving into written sources and writing about history instead. In other cases, however, it seems to me that this choice was made with another goal: that of appearing to be more academic.

Notwithstanding Edward Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism as characterized, amongst other aspects, by a concentration on historical sources and a neglect of the present and the people who live today, it may appear to be more academic to refer to historical sources rather than to data gained from informants, interviewees and participant observation. In this manner it seems that scholars have often prevented the earthy, 'flesh and blood' reality of sexual relationships from intruding into academic research into sexuality and sex.

Another common feature of research on sex and sexuality is that it is predominantly concerned with discourse, which is rarely related to actual practice. Instead of investigating sex and sexuality, many researchers limit themselves to the investigation of talking about sex and sexuality, which in practice often means that they investigate prejudices (Lunsing 2000b). Some researchers seem to think that these discourses are the same as what people actually do (Leupp 1995; Frühstück 1997), although there are exceptions in which the important distinction between discourse and actual activity is made (Pflugfelder 1999). Perhaps it is significant that a brilliant book including discussions of sexual activity (Smith and Wiswell 1982) was written half a century after the research was conducted, when there could be no repercussions on the career of the researcher.

A prime example of this type of research can be found in Jennifer Robertson's work on Takarazuka, the Japanese all-women's revue (Robertson 1998). In the subtitle of the book it says 'sexual politics' and she appears to think that the core of the book is concerned with just that. She writes that she has conducted many years of fieldwork and many interviews, which is hardly substantiated. The book draws almost entirely on written historical sources. Where she relates her findings to other contemporary matters, supposedly in order to frame them into a wider context, she makes blatant mistakes, such as writing that gay magazines are full of advertisements for transvestite clubs like the Elisabeth Club (there are no such advertisements and there are no other clubs like the Elisabeth Club)<sup>18</sup> and that the straight female singer Gao is the equivalent of the Canadian lesbian singer k. d. lang, which she clearly is not.<sup>19</sup>

Real contemporary people are almost absent throughout the book and in the few cases where they turn up, great emphasis is placed on the idea that their identity must be kept secret. Reading, however, what she writes about them, I cannot help but wonder why there was a need for anonymity. The words Robertson quotes and paraphrases from their mouths are hardly controversial, likewise their activities. She describes them for instance as engaging in theatrical performances mimicking those of the Takarazuka Revue. The only sexual matter that is discussed is that they regard lesbianism as an activity rather than as a way of being, which is a way of looking at homosexuality common among straight Japanese people, as opposed to those actually concerned, who in large majority see it as a way of being (Lunsing in press a).

If Robertson's descriptions are based on reliable data and have not been skewed to agree with the researcher's agenda, I cannot imagine what the informants could have against being mentioned, especially given my own experience with informants asking me to use their proper names in cases where sexuality was discussed. Did she, perhaps, fear that her informants would disagree with her descriptions? Not disclosing people's names can, apart from being a way of protecting

informants, also be a way of protecting the researcher. As those who are referred to remain anonymous, nobody can check the information and those who are quoted or described have no way of redress in case they are quoted wrongly.<sup>20</sup> I feel that secrecy may also work to marginalize those concerned.

This is, however, the lesser of my problems with her work. A greater criticism is that I find it representative of the tendency of scholars working on sexuality to create a distance between themselves and their topic by locating it in history and by theorizing in a manner that renders it superficial both to me and, indeed, to all those concerned. Although 'sexual politics' is presented as the major issue in the subtitle of the book, there is hardly anything sexual about what Robertson describes. In fact, she is dealing with questions of gender and somehow thought that that was sexual. This confusion of two related but different issues seems to be common among American scholars in particular. As Sedgwick (1990) and Rubin (1993) have pointed out, it is vital to make a clear distinction between sexuality and gender, a point sorely missed by Robertson.

A similar problem exists with the distinction between sex and gender. The famous lesbian scholar Judith Butler, in her book entitled *Gender Trouble* (1990), is a prime example of the general confusion about sex, gender and sexuality. Although she does make the distinction between gender and sex clear in many places and – very importantly – notes that gender attributes can be uncoupled from sex, she also writes that sex equally is a construct, thus blurring the whole distinction once again. I rather think that what is constructed about sex is gender. Sex itself I see as an essential matter. Apart from the case of transsexuals and hermaphrodites, sex is something that grows on and in people's bodies, not something that is constructed by society. Of course, it is very important to note that gender has too often been dealt with as if it were something belonging either to the female or the male sex, as something that was necessarily coupled to one sex or the other. This essentialist view made the meaning of gender as a construct unclear but that does not mean that sex is not a biological given.

What happens here is that Butler writes about gender while wanting to appear to write about sex and sexuality. This is similar to Robertson writing about gender while wanting to appear to write about sexuality. This characterizes both works by an enormous distancing from the supposed topics of sex and sexuality. In the field of anthropology, in which Robertson professes to work, such distance has not always been seen as productive. Ethnography firstly aims at close in-depth description of particular aspects of culture, and the data are typically gathered by living with the people concerned, by making the distance as small as possible. Closeness is even widely used as a way of validating research results. Authority is established by showing that one 'has been there' (Rabinow 1986). Bringing up general academic theoretical discussions in the middle of ethnographic description is obviously more likely than not to harm their clarity as to how the people concerned view their world.

Why, then, is it in the case of sexuality, that such closeness is avoided or hidden? Why are presentations at conferences discussing sex and sexuality in a direct fashion invariably seen as controversial in the context of Asian/Japanese Studies, even if they are for instance merely descriptive of particular aspects of particular people's lifestyles? Apart from the issue of sexuality, there is also the point that anthropology as such is not always taken as seriously as it deserves by those doing 'hard' social sciences like politics or sociology. In order to establish scientific authority, keeping a distance is often deemed necessary (*ibid.*). However, colleagues working on sexuality appear to feel much more pressure to keep a distance from their topics in order to be accepted than does the average anthropologist.

When I present my papers at conferences in the context of sexuality studies, they are not generally seen as controversial. The only exception might be those papers where I discuss the role sexual activity may have in research, which admittedly is innovative, though by no means unique.<sup>21</sup> In some cases I have been able to enjoy a useful exchange of insights developed from basic ethnographic research. In those cases, the attendants were predominantly not Anglo-American. Many came from developing countries and challenged the dominant theoretical methods



of dealing with sexualities, which are so influenced by North American scholars. Thus, they were trying to interpret their societies in ways that are not accepted yet and to question mainstream theorizations – a challenging project indeed.

They and I usually feel marginalized by the general theorizing carried out by many of the Anglo-American attendants. While, in many cases, offering few or no actual ethnographic data, they seem to be engulfed in queer theories that have no relation any more to the people they are supposed to be dealing with. Some of my non-Western colleagues feel extremely intimidated by this *modus operandi*, while others try to ignore it as much as possible and stick to their own ways. It all seems very much like queer theorists are working in the famous ivory tower of academia. In Japan, prime examples of this are for instance the magazine *Gendai Shisô* [Modern Thought, e.g. vol. 27-1, 1999], but also most of the publications by Occur (see, for example, Binsento, Kazama and Kawaguchi 1997).

A Japanese informant emphatically stated that he wanted them to quit writing all sorts of things about male homosexuality (*gei no dô no kô no*), to which he felt no relation whatsoever. Likewise, American and British gays and lesbians at large care little for queer theories and politics and tend to have a great dislike for the very term 'queer', regardless of its newer political sense. Queer theorizing again can be seen as a way to distance oneself from sexuality per se, which is underlined by the distance felt by people at large who are supposed to be served by it. It may well be that this distancing from the practice of sex and sexuality is partly a result of the marginalization of these topics within academia. Theorizing requires but a fraction of the funding needed for field research. Furthermore, theorizing may be more easily accepted in an academic establishment consisting of people who have not learned to discuss sex and sexuality openly.

Researchers like myself, who work closely with informants in fieldwork settings and build long-term relationships with them, often find themselves betwixt and between. Norms set by the academic establishment conflict greatly with our loyalty to our informants. Siding with the informants and presenting research

data in a manner befitting them, often means that one is regarded as controversial and even 'not scientific enough' by the establishment. Nevertheless, it is the only valid position to take in the light of ethics regarding the treatment of informants. Morals matter.

## Conclusion

Among the various relations I have discussed, the concept of marginality seems most obviously applicable to academia in relation to society and to the topic of sexuality within academic discourse. As for the relation of the informants to society, much depends on what position one takes, and on what is regarded as being the centre in the first place. Clearly, gay and lesbian people are not necessarily in a more marginal position in relation to society than any other people. They exist anywhere. Their sexuality may be regarded as marginalized but it may also become a focal point of media attention. As for sex workers, it seems that the criminalization of sex work placed them more clearly outside the centre and thus they can be seen as marginalized. In both cases, it appears that sexuality itself may be seen as something marginal, something that has no place in everyday life. In reality, however, sexuality is an important part of most people's everyday lives. Marginalization occurs in particular discourses, to which people do not need to adhere. Hence, it may be easy to escape by joining another discourse in which sexuality can be celebrated, a discourse that also exists in Japan. With regard to sexuality, Japanese society seems to consist of a large number of categories living beside each other, rather than in some clear-cut hierarchical system.

It appears that particular societal organizations, such as academia, have worked to marginalize sexuality by trivializing it as a topic, leaving the field largely to journalism. Ironically, this may have led to sexuality becoming a topic that gets more attention in society at large, as journalism reaches more people than academic work. With regard to sexuality, academia, in Japan as well as in international context, may have been isola-

ting itself from what actually happens in society. As for Japanese Studies, it may very well be that 'sexuality is of central, rather than marginal, significance for the understanding of Japanese society' (Valentine 1997: 77), also given the fact that it cuts through all the divisions that have been constructed as determining Japanese society.

While Jerry Springer's sensationalist shows presenting wide varieties of sexual behaviour are watched by students (and younger people) around the world, few universities offer comprehensive courses on sexuality. Thus, the high-handed attitude that can be found within academia in relation to topics like sexuality may lead to the marginalization of academia itself.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Nowadays, a majority of women of all ages work (Sakahigashi 1998: 49), making it obvious that only a minority of women are 'professional housewives', as Joy Hendry (1993) coined housewives without outside occupations. Moreover, only about 50 per cent of wives of *sarariiman* were 'professional housewives' (Sakahigashi 1998: 19).
- <sup>2</sup> Of men aged over 25 in 1990, 6.108 million were never married and of women over 25 for the same year, 3.671 million were never married, together amounting to 10.779 million. The number of divorced people amounted in 1990 to 2.578 million and widowed were 7.571 million,

which combined is 10.149 million (after Sômuchô Tôkeikyoku 1991: 17). These statistics combined amounted already in 1990 to more than 20 million. Since then, the numbers have increased considerably with for instance 7.413 million men and 4.712 million women above the age of 25 remaining unmarried in 1995, totalling 12.125 million (Sômuchô Tôkeikyoku 1998: 17). There are no reliable statistics on feminist, gay and lesbian people inside marriage. Given that statistics suggest that anywhere between about 5 and even over 50 per cent of people at some point in their lives engage in homosexual activity, however, it is clear that there must be millions of people in marriage who have experienced homosexuality. Statistics on numbers of gay and lesbian people are typically unreliable and highly varied. They can be based on very different features such as the question of whether people have engaged in homosexual activity or the question of whether they regard themselves as gay. For the purpose of this project, I included people who regard themselves as gay or lesbian as well as people who feel sexual attraction towards their own sex and people who have engaged in homosexual activity, in which case it definitely concerns many millions. For an insight into the variety produced by surveys, see Singer and Deschamps (1994: 9-12).

- <sup>3</sup> At a meeting in Amsterdam an agent of a major American government funding organization for social science research explained that research on sexuality would only have a chance if the proposals were formulated to show that they were concerned with health issues, such as AIDS.
- <sup>4</sup> In the US, lists circulate of universities that do not hire staff working on homosexuality, so that potential applicants can save themselves the trouble of applying.
- <sup>5</sup> This is a literal translation of Occur's Japanese name. Abroad, in its relations with foreign organizations where it is often the norm to first mention lesbians and then gays, Occur uses the name 'Japan Association for Lesbian and Gay Movement'. Inside Japan, however, gays come first as far as Occur is concerned and not only in name.
- <sup>6</sup> As, for instance, became clear recently, Occur has a tendency to overstate the number of its membership. While I earlier wrote, following their statements, that it comprised about 300 (Lunsing 1998, 1999a), a member recently informed me that it is not more than about 50. This seems plausible, as at activities and events of the group I never counted more than about 20 members. Of these members, the majority can be regarded as marginal as they do not partake in policy-making and are not consulted on matters relating to outwardly directed activities.
- <sup>7</sup> An extensive discussion of my relation to informants can be found in Lunsing (1999b). See also Fran Markowitz (1999) on the complications that trying to be a sex-neutral researcher may cause in a fieldwork situation.

- <sup>8</sup> See Lunsing (in press b and c) for extended discussions of gay venues in Japan.
- <sup>9</sup> An informant spoke of a case in which a rival brothel had hers closed down by complaining to the police. Civilians may thus also be people from a rival establishment who get the police to close down a more successful establishment in the hope of acquiring more patrons themselves. Thus, establishments engaging in prostitution can actually take advantage of the policing of prostitution.
- <sup>10</sup> A more detailed description of this phenomenon is given in Lunsing (1997).
- <sup>11</sup> It is, of course, not the case that *geisha* generally engage in sex work. Principally, they are skilled entertainers (Dalby 1998). However, they may become mistresses and be kept in expensive surroundings by patrons, as was the case here.
- <sup>12</sup> In relation to this, it may also be of interest to look at the organization of sexual activity in the Tokugawa period, when, according to arguments by various scholars (e.g. LaFleur 1992; Leupp 1995; Pflugfelder 1999), prostitution was used by the government politics to support the social order.
- <sup>13</sup> As Miyadai (1997) stresses, even in the case of schoolgirls, social background is irrelevant where it concerns engaging in various sex-work activities.
- <sup>14</sup> *Kansai-ben* is the dialect of the Kansai area, comprising Osaka, Kobe and Kyoto.
- <sup>15</sup> In the Kantô area the closest equivalent of *ossan* is *oyaji*, which is, however, somewhat less derogatory.
- <sup>16</sup> See for instance Binsento, Kazama and Kawaguchi (1997) for Occur's worldview.
- <sup>17</sup> It surprised me that my colleagues went much further in trying to accommodate the wishes of the establishment than I ever feel necessary and that their view of the situation concerning research of sexuality was much gloomier than my own.
- <sup>18</sup> This mistake is partly due to the fact that Robertson failed to discern between the type of transvestites that visit the Elisabeth chain, where they can dress as women in a secure surrounding, and other categories such as the New Half (basically men with breasts or women with penises), who often work in the entertainment business for which some advertisements can be found in gay magazines, though by no means the hundreds Robertson describes.
- <sup>19</sup> Gao is a straight female singer whose record company constructed a mystical image of her gender identity, whereas k.d. lang is an openly lesbian singer. The equivalent of k.d. lang would be the openly lesbian Japanese singer Sasano Michiru.

- <sup>20</sup> Robertson mystifies the secrecy further by placing an exclamation mark behind a note in which she writes that someone's name must remain secret! Roger Goodman (1999) remarked on the quaintness of this exclamation mark.
- <sup>21</sup> In recent years, we have seen three volumes (Kulick and Willson 1995; Lewin and Leapp 1996; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999) discussing this matter, which was earlier focused upon by Cesara (1982).

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